

# Reflecting on How to Optimize Tertiary Student Learning Through the Use of Work Based Learning Within Inclusive Education Courses

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Teaching and learning, as two of the most fundamental components of the educational process, have been of interest to a variety of individuals concerned with tertiary education for a long time (e.g., Biggs & Moore, 1993; Marton, 1997; Ramsden, 2003). Few individuals would deny that learning is the primary purpose of higher education and that teaching is the foremost means by which that goal is accomplished. Consequently, tertiary educators constantly seek opportunities to provide best practice in their university classrooms. As a profession, teaching at the tertiary level obviously draws upon a formal knowledge base. An important step in the translation of the formal knowledge base to enlightened practice is to draw upon tertiary students' experiential and informal knowledge. This paper discusses how a work based learning experience was utilized to enhance a post graduate course on collaborative consultation and team building methods.

It has been said, "Those who can do. Those who can't teach. And those who can't teach – research!" Nonetheless, an alternate view is that academics who teach well, do so because they research and reflect upon their teaching practice. Effective tertiary educators do this in an effort to ensure that their students learn how to apply a combination of research based procedures to the application of their knowledge of effective teaching and learning procedures. Thus, it could be said that those who research into their teaching teach best of all.

While this paper will relate the information to inclusive (or special) education in general, this is only one area of pedagogy where teaching and research skills are particularly sought and encouraged. Teaching and research have become an essential part of the teaching and learning process for children, youth, and adults with special support needs. The evaluation and teaching procedures that have been shown by research to be the most effective for people with special education needs have a strong basis in research procedures and reflective practices.

While they may be passionate about teaching at the tertiary level, this is not to say that all tertiary educators look forward to all aspects of the "job." Given the parameters of end of semester time constraints and the many and varied expectations of an academic (i.e., teaching, research, administration, consultation, community service, and academic leadership), there are certainly aspects of an academic's duties that can be considered to be less attractive than others. Sadly, quality learning is not always high on the agenda when administrative demands take precedent and time constraints are narrow.

## *Exploring University Teaching and Learning*

The difficulties in defining learning have been attributed to attempts to consider the concept of

learning as a single phenomenon: the acquisition of knowledge. As a result, researchers in the past have looked for common elements amongst learning activities (Saljo, 1988). The problem with viewing learning in this way has become apparent with the mounting realization that people's learning and remembering are crucially affected by what they already know (Siegler, 1983).

Tertiary students come to the university learning situation with previously constructed ideas, knowledge, or beliefs that help make sense of new information (Schallert, 1982). Students entering teacher education programs, in particular, generally have definite ideas about teaching and learning, although their ideas cannot always be articulated (Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). That is, student teachers begin with loosely formulated philosophies of education that personally explain what teachers do and how children learn in classrooms (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983). These perspectives serve as culturally based filters to help make sense of the program content, their roles as student teachers, their observations of classrooms at work, and their translation of program content into teaching/learning activities in classrooms (Hollingsworth, 1986; Nespor, 1985).

Beyond knowledge of the subject and pedagogy of teaching and managing students, university lecturers need to know how their adult students learn in classrooms. Namely, university lecturers must comprehensively understand both theories of knowledge acquisition and the social nature of learning in classrooms to define and clarify their roles as tertiary educators.

## *Conceptions of Learning*

Current conceptions of learning are influenced by two major views. The first is a belief that learning is a

constructive rather than reproductive process. The learner does not merely record the material to be learned. Rather, the learner constructs his or her own mental representation of the material to be learned, selects information perceived to be relevant, and interprets this information on the basis of his or her existing knowledge and current needs, adding information not explicitly provided in order to make sense of the new material. Although the theme of constructivism runs through virtually all current discussions of learning, there is considerable variation in the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the various perspectives taken by individual investigators (Derry, 1992; Marshall, 1992).

The second major view is that learning is primarily a social, cultural, and interpersonal process that is influenced as much by social, emotional, and cultural factors as by cognitive ones. Once again, there are variations in the perspectives taken by different investigators, with some emphasizing social-psychological issues (Goodenow, 1992), whereas others emphasize the sociolinguistic and sociocultural issues (Collins & Green, 1992; Weinstein, 1991). This concern for the social context of learning clearly needs to be added to the suggestion that the meaningful learning of complex material (in contrast to the acquisition of isolated information, which in certain cases is still necessary) may be characterized as being active, constructive, cumulative, self-regulated, and goal oriented (Schell, 1986, 1988, 1992).

The learner-centered orientation inherent in modern views of learning has important implications for instruction at the tertiary level, including an increased emphasis on self-regulated learning (e.g., Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989) and studying (e.g., Thomas, 1988). However, for purposes of learning from instruction in the tertiary environment, emphasis needs to be placed on the instructional variables that influence learning (Shuell, 1992). Specifically, lecturers who wish to develop some self knowledge of themselves as teachers will at some point need to undertake a critical reflective journey. Although, it has been raised by Brookfield (1999) that given the frenetic nature of academic life, frequently, such self reflection takes place in isolation.

#### *Reflections on the Development of Ideas as a University Teacher*

Inclusive education is fundamental to creating and sustaining life opportunities and personal fulfillment. Faculty staff members who teach undergraduate and post-graduate students studying the discipline of inclusive education have a responsibility to do all that they can to influence the inclusive education profession through their work. However, aspects of teaching

children with special needs has not always been viewed as teacher work.

In the past, some have questioned the role of a teacher in special education (particularly students with the most severe disabilities) and described that role as little more than nurse-maid or child minder. Consequently, tertiary educators working in high support needs special education environments have their work cut out for them. Accordingly, it is very important to inspire tertiary students preparing to work in this highly specialized field, through enthusiastic and dynamic teaching. This is done in an effort to develop caring, reflective, and resourceful special education teachers who will value their role and aim to establish their presence in the rank and file of the teaching profession.

#### *Reflecting on the Learning of Tertiary Students*

Teacher educators have the privilege and responsibility to design learning opportunities and to model teaching practices for far reaching effects on the special education community. For example, pre-service teachers of the 1970s would have had an opportunity to have taken on the role of school principals, curriculum advisers, and/or special program coordinators. In which case, they would be considered to be educational leaders in their own right.

Such university graduates would be seen as key personnel for their schools and, as such, they would be in a position to lead innovation, to contribute dynamically to professional teams, and would be student centered, collaborative, informed, and effective. If tertiary educators have done their jobs well in the university classroom, then they are a part of that. For these reasons, the tertiary educator's job carries with it a huge responsibility, not only to their tertiary students, but also, to their students' students.

Whilst effective teaching, which can lead to enhanced learning for students with special needs, is amongst the most important work that a person can do, it rests upon recognition of the importance of sound educational theory and research based practice to inform this. According to Brookfield (1995), "Knowing something of how students experience learning helps to build convincing connections between what we want them to do and their own concerns and expectations" (p. 93). It is very important for tertiary educators to work hard to establish and develop relationships with students. Good learning is all about productive relationships.

It is fundamental to the tertiary educator's role to foster the development of a vibrant and supportive learning community through their relationship with students. Students need to know that university lecturers care about them and their learning. This can be

evidenced through well-organized courses and materials; interesting, exciting, and fun activities for diverse learners; deep seated knowledge of the unit concepts; and flexibility to accommodate emergent student learning needs. If any one of these features is missing or is underdone, then the lack of care for students is obvious to them, and the learning must suffer.

Students need to come to know themselves as learners: their strengths and their preferred approaches and strategies for learning. Tertiary educators can be responsive to this by incorporating multiple learning pathways and multiple representations of concepts in course resources. In practice, this is done by building into tutorials a variety of different learning options for students including, but not limited to, pen and paper activities, loosely structured e-mail discussion forums, textbook resources, journal articles, face-to-face seminars, workshops, case studies, digital video and audio segments, and feature videos.

Tertiary educators should also consider constructing their courses in a way that will develop their students' critical thinking. This can be done by choosing texts and articles that challenge parochial views of schooling and educational issues. It is also advisable to encourage students to present at staff development workshops and post-graduate, national, and regional conferences.

University lecturers are able to make significant changes to the way in which their individual units are taught. To do this, it is very important to consistently use some form of student feedback to inform one's teaching. These include university sponsored teaching and learning surveys, student discussion, and lecturers' self-made surveys. Although, Brookfield (1999) has indicated that many university student evaluation indicators are frequently little more than satisfaction surveys (i.e., how much people like us). However, if one takes on board the students' comments and evidences responsive teaching (i.e., starting with an understanding of the student and the concepts to be learned), then this is fundamental to making a positive difference in the way people conceive of themselves as learners. Responsive teaching is the way toward enabling students to feel a sense of ownership of their own learning paths, to understand the way to learn things best, and to engender a sense of pride in their learning achievements.

#### *Work-based Approaches to Learning in Post-Graduate Courses*

Pre-service educational degrees have traditionally included practice teaching placement components interspersed with full time university attendance. For many years, these experiences have been widely

accepted within the domain of special education to provide student teachers with work based learning (WBL) opportunities. Basically, it is hoped that by pairing a pre-service teacher with an experienced teacher for a period of two to three weeks, the WBL will prepare student teachers for the world of work.

However, it is less likely that one will find post-graduate special education students attending part-time evening classes being exposed to similar WBL experiences. Clearly, there are logistical reasons for this. Post-graduate inclusive education students are often already involved in full- or part-time employment. Further, given their post service status, perhaps there is also the assumption that as post-graduate students studying education courses are frequently gainfully employed as teachers, further course related practical teaching experience is not required.

In a number of Master in Educational Studies awards, there are units which offer post-graduate education students the opportunity to learn the necessary higher order skills required to undertake a position as an educational advisor or consultant (e.g., management foundations and frameworks, advanced problem solving and team work, communication processes for school consultation, etc). The issue of concern here is that, unlike pre-service education students who engage in a series of teaching practicum placements as part of their course, post-graduate students studying how to be a special education consultant are rarely offered an opportunity to engage in the many complex challenges associated with being a consultant in a real school setting.

The course "The Consultative Process" is one of a strand of specialized subjects on offer as part of the Master of Education (Special Education) Degree at the University of Sydney, NSW, Australia. This unit of study is designed to facilitate the development of the knowledge and skills required by post-service special educators to take on a consultative role. Post-graduate students engaged in this subject are exposed to theory and practice involved in the consultation process, but to date, this course does not have a practical work based learning component.

Thus, the opportunity to be engaged in a work based learning exercise via the role of workshop leaders for a disability awareness program at a local secondary school was overwhelmingly popular by these students (for a full account of the WBL project see Tait, 2006). Comments by post-graduate students when invited to help develop and implement the one day disability awareness workshop included the following:

- Yes! It will be a great opportunity to put coursework into practice.
- I think I will learn how to learn from others in this consultation program. Count me in!

- This is a great opportunity to see how the factors raised in class – (i.e., distance and time factors) will make collaboration a challenge to implement. Yes! Yes!
- This will be a great opportunity for these secondary students to learn empathy and begin to become aware of disability issues. I would be happy to be involved.
- This is a wonderful way of creating disability awareness among children from affluent backgrounds. Yes - because I am so passionate about this cause.
- This will be a great experience for the special needs students. By creating an awareness of different types of disabilities in the secondary students, we can hope that they are better accepted by society. I would love to be involved.
- Yes. I see this as a fantastic opportunity to develop a positive and inclusive learning atmosphere and to help create an inclusive society.

#### *Setting the Scene of the Work-based Learning Experience*

The aim of the one-day workshop was threefold. Firstly, the workshop was intended to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities through inviting speakers experienced in promoting inclusive education and speakers with disabilities to talk to the secondary school students (one of whom was a previous graduate of the host secondary school who had experienced a sport related injury resulting in paraplegia). Secondly, the workshop aimed to increase awareness of the impact of a disability through their active participation in 4 x 45 minute disability simulation workshop style exercises (specifically, hearing, vision, physical, and intellectual impairment). Thirdly, the workshop was designed to increase the secondary school students' knowledge and understanding of people with disabilities and how to appropriately interact with students with severe disabilities through discussion and opportunity to ask informed questions of workshop leaders experienced in inclusive education in a supportive environment. At the conclusion of the workshop, all participants (post-graduate students/workshop leaders, secondary school staff, and students) were invited to comment on their experiences of the workshop anonymously via an open-ended evaluation questionnaire.

#### *University Students' Impressions of their Work-based Learning Experience*

The Master of Education (Special Education) students were overwhelmingly positive about their work based learning experience and subsequently felt that due to this very positive exposure they felt confident to undertake a consultative role in similar situations. Below are comments from the post graduate students on their perception of the one day workshop as a work based learning opportunity for them.

I feel that the workshop was very successful. I absolutely enjoyed meeting new people, cooperating with others, learning new facts and working in a different environment. I know that for myself, I would have benefited from The Consultation Process (i.e., the University course) but I also think that as this was a "real" learning opportunity, it helped me to present a better workshop (for the GSS students) and ultimately a better experience for the students at the special school.

I thought the one day workshop was a wonderful opportunity for Master's students to put into practice, and experience first hand, the skills required for effective consultation. The project also provided a vital link between the University and a reputable school. This further enhanced the school students' understanding and appreciation of unique issues involving people with special needs.

With the preparation and collaboration that went into planning this workshop starting months prior, I felt confident in my ability to assume a consultant role and I would feel very comfortable presenting another similar workshop to other groups based on the experience at GSS.

Our lecturer was very well organized, prepared, knowledgeable, experienced, and cooperative. This guidance helped us all immensely. It was brilliant to be able to put theory into practice while I was studying and to have Dr. Tait on hand on the day of the workshop. The day had to be successful. With such supportive guidance it didn't have any other choice.

Much of the University course material was actually used and acted out within this project so

it helped to illustrate exactly what we were simultaneously learning. I would definitely recommend that this be included in future courses at Uni.

Ramsden (2003) indicates that effective higher education should assist tertiary students to integrate formal and informal knowledge in theory and in classroom decision making. As can be seen from these tertiary students' reports, it is very important for university lecturers to structure the experiences, knowledge base, and reflective activity of their students so that they have opportunities to build these schemata more effectively and more quickly.

### Discussion

#### *How to Assist with the Professional Development as a University Teacher*

*Strategy 1: Optimizing student learning and active participation.* Arousing curiosity is absolutely central to engaging learners. Many tertiary educators have had significant success with the use of what is known as "authentic material." Authentic material includes a range of materials that might emerge within the professional and day-to-day experiences of students (e.g., audio and video resources, characterizing school staff room conversations, samples of student work, student reports, IEPs, newspaper and magazine articles, case study narratives, and guest speakers). These resources can be used to draw students into issues in an effort to spring board or launch them toward posing and researching their own questions.

These resources bring the concepts to life and provide a grounding for discussion and exploration of relevant research and literature. Enthusiasm for teaching is one of the fundamental requirements for student learning. If a productive relationship is to be established, then students must have no doubt about the enthusiasm of the teacher. It simply is not possible to foster student development and understanding without university lecturers communicating their own sense of excitement and enjoyment for the shared learning journey that they take with their students.

Tertiary teaching is exciting and creative work. No class, no student is the same and there are endless ways in which students can engage with concepts to be motivated and inspired. If tertiary educators are passionate about teaching, then they will keenly involve themselves in as many teaching and learning activities as possible. The result is that the excitement of the challenge will never fade. Each class that is lead and each unit that is designed is unique, and so teaching should never become passé.

*Strategy 2: Assessment strategies that directly relate to unit of study outcomes.* Ultimately, learning and assessment can be considered as being on two sides of the same coin. That is, in an effort to structure student learning appropriately, one must have in mind the intended outcomes, and this is framed by the assessment methods selected and the criteria that is outlined. High quality learning is absolutely dependent on high quality feedback. It is essential that students receive timely responses to and comments on their work, while their understandings are still fresh and they are more inclined to focus on mastery rather than simple performance goals.

Consequently, it is vital that students are given immediate written and verbal comments upon class presentations. Further, it is important to offer return comments on written assignments within two to three weeks of submission so that assessment is of maximum use to students' development and understanding. Where possible, university lecturers should try to meet with weaker students to provide them personal feedback on written pieces of assessment. This is particularly so if it is felt that the student would benefit from supplementation to the written comments, or if a student appears to hold a misconception that might require support.

### Conclusion

Teaching in a tertiary environment requires that academics continually monitor their approaches and develop rationales for their actions and practice. This is true of any university appointment, but an appointment in a Faculty of Education means that academics are on display as a teacher. Students expect to experience best practice in teaching, and they make no concessions for poor planning, design, organization, or presentation. These students do respect those who "practice what they preach."

A commitment to quality teaching and learning includes a responsibility to voice and lead the development of quality practices beyond a university lecturer's own subjects. The design of every teaching and learning sequence needs to be informed by a careful analysis of past student feedback, particularly with regard to the type of things that would motivate them as individuals and as a group to become engaged with the material. It is also important to ensure that students feel valued for their comments on one's approach to teaching and learning. Finally, tertiary educators would do well to consider ways in which they can develop their students as independent thinkers rather than simply consumers and reactors.

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